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ABSTRACT

The Psychological Distress Inventory (PDI) has been shown to discriminate between college students seeking help in the college counseling center from non-help seekers, between depressed and non-depressed students, and between students' global self-appraisals of high versus low stress. A study was conducted to investigate concurrent validity for the PDI by exploring the inventory's ability to discriminate among college students with respect to their level of support, attitudes toward the opposite sex, and career indecision. Subjects, one-half of whom were experiencing high levels of life stress and one-half of whom were experiencing low levels of life stress, were 88 male and 88 female college students. Subjects completed the PDI, and the Attitudes toward Women, Attitudes toward Men, Social Support, Career Indecision, and Certainty of Major scales. The results indicated that high stress was associated with high social support. Other findings suggest that high stress interferes with vocational exploration and certainty regarding one's tentatively chosen field of study. The present results offer some validity of the PDI. Attitudes toward men and women, however, seemed relatively free from bias resulting from life stress. Additionally, analysis of the Attitudes toward men subscores suggests that they may assess somewhat stereotypic sex role patterns. (NB)

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Personality and Career Concomitants of Life Stress in College Students

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Personality and Career Concomitants of Life Stress in College Students

Interest in and understanding of the role of stressful life events received impetus following Holmes and Rahe's (1967) reporting of the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). Changes in stressful life events impenging upon individuals have been associated with a variety of maladaptive indicators, such as, health changes, interpersonal habits, and seeking professional help (Goodman et al., 1985; Holmes & Holmes, 1970).

Since publication of the SRRS (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) many questions have arisen about the measurement and meaning of life stress. First, debate continues over the role of the individual's perception and appraisals of life stresses. Some suggest that social support networks may explain why some individuals encounter stressful life events without experiencing distress. Possibly social support modulates the perception and/or impact of stressful life events (Antonevsky, 1979; Cobb, 1976; Goodman, Sewelly, & Jampol, 1984; Dohrenwend & Shrout, 1985). Second, different opinions exist concerning the potential for confounding between what life stress scales measure and criteria they are used to predict (Dohrenwend & Shrout, 1985; Lazarus, De Longis, Folkman, & Gruen, 1985). Furthermore, correlations between the number of life events and disturbance typically run less than .35 raising question about the strength of the association between the two variables (Goodman et al., 1984). Third, others have pointed out life event checklists (e.g.,

SRSS) often contain items irrelevant to specific clinical groups being studied or treated (Robkin & Struening, 1976). Fourth, Mehanic (1975) and Vinokur and Selzer (1975) raised concern over the logic of combining positive and negative events. Goodman et al., (1984) are of the opinion that the relation between life events and distress is due to stressful negative events rather than all life events as previously conceptualized. Fifth, controversy also centers around the degree of life stress attributable to qualitative versus quantitative aspects of life events (e.g., Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978). Finally, a key issue in conceptualizing life stress involves demarcation of the time interval within which occurence of stressful events is determined (Dohrenwend & Shrout, 1985).

Despite these theoretical issues, several attempts have been made to scale life event stress (e.g., Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Johnson & McCutcheon, 1980; Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981; Lustman, Sowa, & Monroe, 1980; O'Hara, 1980; Monroe, 1983; Pearlin, 1983; Zitzow, 1984). Several investigators have attempted to devise stress scales for college student populations specifically (Lustman et al., 1983; Zitrow, 1984). The present study focused on Lustman et al.'s (1983) instrument: the Psychological Distress Inventory (PDI).

The PDI has been shown to discriminate between college students seeking help in the college counseling center from non-help seekers, between depressed and non-depressed students, and between students' global self-appraisals of high versus low stress. The present study attempted to investigate concurrent validity for the PDI by exploring

the inventory's ability to discriminate among college students with respect to their: (a) level of support, (b) attitudes toward the opposite sex, and (c) career indecision. High stress levels were expected to be associated with less social support, less favorable attitudes toward the opposite sex, and greater vocational uncertainty

Method

Subjects

Eighty-eight male and 88 female college students constituted the sample. Half of the subjects were currently experiencing either high or low levels of life stress.

Measures

PDI. The PDI (Lustman et al., 1983) consists of a 50 aversive life stress events distributed over four subscales: Depression, Anxiety, Somatic Discomfort, and Stress. Internal consistency estimates for the subscales range from .61 to .73 while retest (6 week interval) reliabilities for the subscales range from .72 to .83.

Items on the PDI were selected to include aversive life events. Respondents appraise each event in terms of its occurence during the past 12 months and the degree of aversiveness of the event. Higher scores on each subscale indicate greater life stress in that specific domain.

Attitudes Toward Women (ATW). Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp's (1973) abridged (r with full scale = .96) ATW scale was used to

determine subject's feminist orientations. Higher scores reflect more favorable attitudes toward women.

Attitudes Toward Men (ATM). Iazzo (1983) devised the ATM scale to assess women's attitudes about men. The ATM scale encompasses four content areas that define man: marriage and parenthood (MP), sexuality (SX), work (W), and physical and personality attributes (PPA). Internal consistency for the four subscales ranges from .60 to .85 while the alpha coefficient for the total score equals .79. Higher total scores suggest more favorable attitudes toward men while higher scores for each content area indicate a more positive evaluation of that domain.

Social Support (SS). Pollack and Harris' (1983) SS scale was employed for subjects to report their self-appraisals of the degree of support they perceived in their environment. Internal reliability of the SS scale ranges from .74 to .78 (Schneider & Polk, in press) and Pollack and Harris (1983) report retest of reliability of .90.

Career Indecision (CI). Fuqua and Hartman (1983) presented a behaviorally anchored scale to assess college students' indecision in relation to vocational decision-making. Fuqua and Hartman reported a Cronbach alpha of .66 and retest reliability of .57 for the total scores. Higher CI scores are indicative of greater indecision.

Certainty of Major (CM). Students indicated their tentative CM by rating their certainty concerning their college major on a 11 point scale, where 1 = uncertain and 11 = certain. This scale has been found to discriminate between subjects receiving different types of vocational counseling (Hoyt, 1955; Wachowiak, 1972).

Procedure

As part of a larger study, the PDI was employed to screen 842 students enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses. To identify enough males and females experiencing greater and lessor degrees of life stress for the larger study, a median split based on the distribution of both sexes was performed on each of the PDI subscales. The median values for the PDI subscales were: Depression = 24, Anxiety = 20, Somatic Discomfort = 21, and Stress = 27. High stressed subjects were defined as students who scored above the median on all four subscales while students with scores falling below the medians on all PDI subscales constituted the low stress participants.

The final sample consisted of 45 male and 43 female high stress students and 44 male and 44 female low stress subjects. While all 176 of these selected students completed the ATW, ATM, SS, CI, and CM measures prior to their participation in the larger study, these five measures constituted the data for the present 2 (subject sex) X 2 (high vs. low life stress) between subjects' design.

Results

A 2 X 2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed on ATW, ATM, SS, CI, and CM scores using Wilk's lambda criterion. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for these scores.

Insert Table 1 About Here

In the MANOVA, significant effects were observed for stress [$F(5, 168) = 4.50$, $p < .001$] and for sex [$F(5, 168) = 7.10$, $p < .001$]. The stress by sex interaction was not significant [$F(5, 168) = 1.69$]. Table 2 summarizes the subsequent univariate tests.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Univariate analysis for the ATW scale revealed a significant effect for subjects' sex ($p < .001$), but not for stress levels. Relative to males ($M = 49.28$), females ($M = 53.47$) regarded women in a more positive light.

In the univariate analysis of the SS scores, a significant main effect emerged for stress only (See Table 2). High stress subjects obtained higher social support scores ($p < .001$) than low stress subjects, respectively, Ms = 57.65 and 54.52.

The univariate tests for the CI and CM indices revealed significant effects for stress ($p < .05$), but not for sex. On the CI scale, high stress subjects ($M = 8.38$) evidenced more indecision with respect to career enhancing behaviors than low stress subjects ($M = 7.45$). With regard to certainty of college major, participants experiencing less stress indicated greater certainty about their CM than high stress students, respective Ms = 8.7 and 7.8.

Total ATM scores were unrelated to either of the independent variables. Since Iazzo's (1983) factor analysis of the ATM scale yielded four factors, an exploratory 2 (stress level) X 2 (sex) MANOVA using Wilk's criterion was performed on the four ATM subscale scores.

The only multivariate effect from this MANOVA occurred for sex [$F(4, 169) = 5.53$, $p < .001$]. Table 3 summarizes univariate tests for the

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Insert Tables 3 and 4 About Here

ATM subscores and Table 4 presents means and standard deviations for ATM subscores. Males ($M = 6.78$) scored higher ($p < .05$) than females ($M = 5.80$) on the SX subscale suggesting that males more positively valued the genital aspects of their own sexuality. On the other hand, women ($M = 2.56$) scored significantly ($p < .01$) higher than men ($M = 2.05$) on the W subscale. Women participants held more positive attitudes for male work roles of achieving success and breadwinning functions than the men did.

Discussion

This study explored concurrent validity for the PDI. Perhaps the most perplexing result in the current analysis was the finding that high stress was also associated with high social support. Since the SS scale involved a self-appraisal, the possibility exists that high stress impaired participants' ability to conduct such an assessment. On the other hand, high stress subjects may engage more actively in behavior and cognitive self-talk designed to increase their level of social support as a mechanism to reduce and cope with high life stress. Antonevsky (1979) and Cobb (1976) offered the hypothesis that social support buffers the effects of stressful life events. High levels of social support would facilitate coping with aversive life stresses.

Association of high levels of social support and high stress, as occurred in the present investigation, would not be unexpected then. However as no independent assessment of concomitant psychological distress or maladaptive coping was made in the current study, it is not possible to evaluate the buffering hypothesis. However the obtained findings would be consistent with such speculation.

With respect to ATW, consistent with previous research (e.g., Schneider, 1985; Spence et al., 1973), females held more favorable attitudes toward their own sex than males. Interestingly low stress subjects felt somewhat more positive ($p < .10$) about femininity, providing some confirmation that high stress may interfere with development of more coeval attitudes toward women. Researchers might investigate this issue further to determine whether stress contributes to traditional typing of female sex roles or whether adherence to such sex roles may constitute a host condition increasing susceptibility to negative life events that generate stress. No patterns emerged for attitudes toward men. The ATM was devised to assess women's attitudes about men (Iazzo, 1983). Consequently, it may not discriminate among men's attitudes toward males or levels of stress.

Data from the CI and CM suggested that high stress interferes with vocational exploration and certainty regarding one's tentatively chosen field of study. Such a disruptive effect seems congruent with intuitive notions of life stress. However, the finding of such an association does not allow one to rule out the possibility that high stress individuals might approach vocational decision-making more

impulsively as a way to cope with stress, that some threshold level of stress may be necessary to motivate sound career decision-making, or that poor vocational choices increase the probability of exposure and vulnerability to life stress.

While no data are available for males on the ATM scale (Iazzo, 1983), the present analysis of the ATM subscales provided some interesting results. While stress was not associated with the ATM construct, participant sex was. In the SX domain, men held a more positive attitude toward the physical aspects of male sexuality. Relative to men's evaluation, women were more positive about male career and financial success. Both of these findings might be viewed as consistent with stereotyping of men's sex-roles. However as evidence on the ATM scale has focused on women's attitudes about men (Iazzo, 1983), confirmation of such an interpretation must await further research.

In sum, the present results offer some validity of the PDI. However attitudes toward men and women seemed relatively free from bias resulting from life stress. Additionally, analysis of the ATM subscores suggests that they may assess somewhat stereotypic sex role patterns.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations

Scale		High Stress		Low Stress	
		Male (*n* = 45)	Female (*n* = 43)	Male (*n* = 44)	Female (*n* = 44)
ATW	*M*	47.33	54.93	51.23	55.71
	SD	10.09	10.05	8.75	7.07
ATM	*M*	31.31	33.07	31.48	31.07
	SD	8.60	6.98	7.19	8.05
SS	*M*	57.00	58.30	54.80	54.25
	SD	6.53	5.33	5.60	5.15
CI	*M*	9.08	7.67	7.80	7.11
	SD	2.66	2.73	2.15	2.12
CM	*M*	7.44	8.21	9.23	8.30
	SD	3.01	2.95	2.33	2.56

Note. ATW = Attitudes Toward Women, ATM = Attitudes Toward Men, SS = Social Support, CI = Career Indecision, CM = Choice of Major.

Table 2

Univariate *F* Tests

Scale	Stress Levels (A)[a]	Sex (B)[a]	A X B[a]
ATW	2.92	19.55**	1.31
ATM	.62	.33	.86
SS	13.31**	.19	1.16
CI	6.39*	8.17	1.00
CM	5.17*	.04	4.25

Note. ATW = Attitudes Toward Women; ATM = Attitudes Toward Men; SS = Social Support; CI = Career Indecision; CM = Choice of Major.

[a] *df* = 1, 172

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .001$.

Table 3

Univariate F Tests for ATM Subscales

Subscale	Stress Level (A)[a]	Sex (B)[a]	A X B[a]
MP	1.22	.87	.02
SX	.40	6.52*	.26
W	.19	6.93*	3.06
PPA	.25	.80	.88

Note. MP = Marriage and Parenthood, SX = Sexuality, W = Work, PPA = Physical and Personality Attributes.

[a] df = 1, 172.

*p < .05.

**p < .01.

Table 4

ATM Subscale Means and Standard Deviations

Subscale		High Stress		Low Stress	
		Male (n = 47)	Female (n = 45)	Male (n = 46)	Female (n = 46)
MP	M	14.60	15.40	13.88	14.48
	SD	5.51	4.85	4.41	4.77
SX	M	6.80	6.02	6.75	5.59
	SD	3.10	2.13	2.38	2.30
W	M	1.91	2.81	2.18	2.36
	SD	1.27	1.59	1.23	1.34
PPA	M	8.00	8.83	8.65	8.63
	SD	3.38	2.42	3.07	3.10

Note. MP = Marriage and Parenthood, SX = Sex, W = Work, PPA = Physical and Personality Attributes.